


#Africa4Her Generates Support for Women and Girls: Mercedes Leburu, South Africa

Poet Mercedes Leburu has pledged to help women  become more confident. A portion of her poem titled Africa4Her is below.

We asked some of the many YALI Network members who in March made an [#Africa4Her](#) pledge to invest in women and girls in their community how they have fulfilled that pledge. Here is Mercedes Leburu's story.

I pledged to empower young women in South Africa to become confident and lead a liberated lifestyle through writing poetry that will boost their self-esteem; to challenge young girls to showcase their unique abilities, thus moving from being a MIS-FIT in society to being their BEST-FIT; and to groom youth to invest in what they believe in — their ideals, principles and standards that not only benefit them but can impact others.

Young people generally want acceptance, to be part of a tribe or movement, as they are insecure and find comfort in being a part of something bigger. Insecurity is a challenge faced by many young women. We tend to care what other people think, and strive to please others, which robs the continent of individuality.

This gap in my community and generation of young, confident, empowered and liberated women urgently needs to be filled. Our need for acceptance and human validation as young women has diminished our creative thought and thus we tend to be so busy trying to fit in that we have lost our uniqueness.

The growing need to groom youth to invest in what they believe in — ideals, principles, and standards that not only benefit them but impact others around them through their natural God-given talents — was imperative.

I was fortunate enough to grow up having a mentor. I wanted to reach out to those around me and aid them to showcase their unique abilities, thus moving from being a MIS-FIT in society to being their BEST-FIT.

Service is one of the core features of being a strong leader. Serving one another is critical to building a sustainable Africa, because “no man is an island.” We need to be hungry to serve as youth, as we are the future leaders.

Service is not like an extra credit on a test; it is the whole test, and either you pass it or you fail it.

The experience [with Africa4Her] as a whole has shaped my character and has taught me to forge on despite the odds, which is a leadership trait that I can use in the future.

I have learnt to be patient and that little by little I can reach the end goal.

The best thing that one can do in this world is discover who they are and be the best of that person consistently — to express yourself through poetry.

When you focus on improving other people's lives it also improves your life and ultimately contributes to a sustainable Africa, even if it is in a small way.

When God places something in your heart, pursue it relentlessly, be authentic, and be your best fit! At the end of the day, it boils down to how many people you can really influence, how many of those people will influence others, and how many people's lives will change through changing thinking and perception.

I always have an action plan for the things I want to achieve. I act by putting my vision into action. And I delegate responsibility to recently established team members, because attempting to do everything on my own was a recipe for disaster.

As further follow-up to my pledge, on September 5-6, 2015, I will hold a poetry camp.

More than 1,000 YALI Network members made an [#Africa4Her](#) pledge. They represent 47 countries, and 54 percent of them are men. If you made an [#Africa4Her](#) pledge and would like to share your story, please email us at YALINetwork@state.gov and use the subject line “[#Africa4Her](#).”

“Africa4Her” - a poem by Mercedes Leburu

So what ...

If they look at me with their piercing eyes

Scrutinizing my face, body, and thighs

So what ...

If they emit prolonged chuckles when they see me

Endlessly commenting on who I ought to be

I don't break down and fall apart,

Instead I chose to set myself apart

For I know, Earthly eyes can never tell the contents of my heart

So I gear up, ignore it and restart.

[#Africa4Her Generates Support for Women and Girls: Olakunle Adewale, 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow, Nigeria](#)


We asked some of the many YALI Network members who in March made an [#Africa4Her](#) pledge to invest in women and girls in their community how they have fulfilled that pledge. Here is **Olakunle Adewale's** story.

I have started work on my pledge by making an art piece that calls for action by all professionals to invest in girls and women in Africa.

I pledged to invest in young women and girls in Africa using a creative approach that can help improve the outcome of their lives. This will be achieved through art workshops which will be

facilitated by volunteer professionals in the field of visual arts in Nigeria.

The products of these workshops will be exhibited on various media platforms — social media, digital media, and electronic and print media. Finally, the works will be exhibited for sale while a percentage of the income generated will be given to the girls and women who produced the works. The participants will also have the privilege of being mentored by professionals during and after the program.

The painting is a picture of a young African woman  enclosed in a light bulb. The bulb is at the center of an opened book which has the colors of the flag of the United States of America and colors of flags of other African countries. The painting titled Africa4Her shows empowerment for the African woman through investment in education.

I believe professionals should lend support to the female folks who sometimes do not have the opportunities of being empowered like their male counterparts. I feel obligated to help in educating and empowering the girl child as an artist. It is important to create a just society where there is equality in opportunity for men and women, boys and girls.

I have been a volunteer for more than a decade working with nonprofits through community and civic engagement. In the past five years, I have mobilized more than 500 young professionals who volunteered at nonprofit organizations. I have learned about the power of collaboration and teamwork if one is going to make an indelible mark! It has also birthed in me the joy and fulfillment of contributing my quota in making the world a better place.

I volunteered to fill the space and vacuum in my community by engaging my leadership skills in ensuring a better world for everyone that lives within my reach. Everyone is endowed with an ability to innovate, associate, create and cultivate something that would be of great benefit to the world. Most importantly, being a visual artist and educator, I believe art can be used for community development and civic engagement by educating and empowering people around me. I feel i'm a indebted to my society, thus i have an obligation to perform and take responsibility for the development of my environment.

For me, service more of a life style than the gift of service to humanity. It is better to serve than to be served. ... I grow when I sow seeds of greatness into the lives people around me by providing opportunities and platforms where they can increase in knowledge and skill acquisition.

It is best to be a servant leader because it attracts more reward in this world and the world to come. The experience has taught me empathy, compassion, respect for humanity and increased passion in my pursuit of making the world a better place. Leadership is space — not just a place to occupy but a place to multiply people.

Nigerian artist Olakunle Adewale displays the painting he named Africa4Her.



This experience will make me a better leader because everyone matters, irrespective of their gender,

class, tribe or race. So there is equal opportunity for development and empowerment.

More so, the need for partnership and collaboration with people in the community, community leaders and other organizations are good ways to achieve greatness and collective success. It will give me more opportunity to learn from partner organization in my campaign and advocate in fulfillment of my pledge to invest in women and girls in Africa.


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Climate Change a 'Critical Issue,' Obama Says

Join #YALIGoesGreen this month. Learn how to get involved at yali.state.gov/climate

Global climate change “is going to be one of the critical issues that you face,” President Obama told 500 Mandela Washington Fellows in early August.

Climate change “will affect everybody,” he told the Fellows, who were meeting in Washington for the second annual Fellowship Presidential Summit. Obama added that developing countries will likely be most affected “because they have less margin of error” to cope with extreme weather changes.

President Obama addressed the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellows in  Washington.

Credit: © AP Images


While some countries try to ignore the threat, he said, “you have to project where you will be 20 years from now. ... Find new, sustainable ways of generating energy that don’t produce carbon.”

The president emphasized that the United States supports entrepreneurs working in the fields of clean energy and conservation. He noted that the Young African Leadership Initiative’s [online courses](#) provide entrepreneurs with basic information on how to create a business or nonprofit.

The United States is taking aggressive action to reduce carbon emissions that lead to climate change and will take part in the United Nations’ climate-change conference in Paris later this year, the president said. The Obama administration recently unveiled a major plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the nation’s coal-burning power plants.

Obama pointed out that when he was in Nairobi, he highlighted the U.S.-initiated [Power Africa](#) program. Launched in 2013, the program brings the private sector and governments together to

increase the number of sub-Saharan Africans with access to electric power. Part of that, he said, is putting solar panels on the roofs of rural homes. The panels will cost the same as what residents now pay for kerosene.

With more clean-energy lighting, children have  more time to study. Credit: USAID

“Access to electricity is fundamental to opportunity in this age. It’s the light that children study by, the energy that allows an idea to be transformed into a real business. It’s the lifeline for families to meet their most basic needs. And it’s the connection that’s needed to plug Africa into the grid of the global economy,” Obama said when he announced Power Africa.

Earlier in the summer, the president called climate change a threat to national security and said that an increase in natural disasters will lead to more humanitarian crises that pose direct threats to stability. The White House has said that responding to extreme weather competes for scarce resources and will affect the global economy.

In June, Obama announced a [\\$34 million international public-private partnership](#) to help developing countries strengthen their climate resilience.

Volunteerism

The experiences of the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellows were as varied as the programs at their host universities, but they all had one component in common: community service.

Nangamso Koza, a Mandela Washington Fellow from South Africa, wore gloves while shoving garbage into a plastic bag. Along with other fellows at Howard University in Washington, Koza joined in for Nelson Mandela Day with other local organizations cleaning a Washington neighborhood.


Howard University Mandela Washington Fellows joined other Washington organizations to offer  service on Mandela Day, July 18 2015. (State Dept./D.A. Peterson)

“Today, we served the people of DC through cleaning up the streets,” said Koza. “I am representing my village, the people of the Eastern Cape. I’m representing South Africa. I’m representing Africa. They were serving me, and now it’s my turn to do service for them.”


“The program really stresses servant leadership, being a servant of your community, leading by example and engaging through community service,” said Colleen Brady of IREX, the organization that implements the Mandela Washington Fellowship. All the programs the fellows participate in include at least one service event each week.

At Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, Mandela fellows mentored secondary school students on entrepreneurship as well as interviewing and resume writing.

At Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana, the fellows pitched in at Unity Gardens, which aims to help the hungry, offering gardening, food and cooking instruction.

University of Notre Dame Mandela Washington Fellows (from left) Lebohang Selloane from  South Africa, Raindolf Owusu from Ghana, and Veronica Affuah Da-Silva from Ghana (Courtesy photo)

Fellows at the University of Delaware worked with, among other organizations, the Delaware Center for Justice, on gun-violence intervention programs, legal services for both elderly victims of crime and aging prisoners.

University of Delaware Mandela Washington Fellow, Amina Nur Alkali (center), speaks with  representatives from education advocacy groups. (Courtesy photo)

“To be a leader, you have to be serving people,” said Setloke Lekhela, a fellow from Lesotho. “You have to get out of your office and be part of the people.”

Lesson in Leadership: Put People First

Abdoulaye Atim (State Dept.) 

Mandela Washington Fellows Abdoulaye Atim of Chad and David Capo of Côte d’Ivoire say their summer study experiences in the United States taught them that leadership requires creative thinking.

Atim is a turbine controller for international oil and gas giant ExxonMobile. But his heart also is with solar energy. Founder of 3ACE Energy and Trading in N’Djamena, he sells affordable sun-powered lanterns to run rural homes and hospitals, and sun-energized phones to help farmers in the field communicate with suppliers and buyers. His goal is to improve local access to renewable energy. He started the venture using his own savings and manages four employees plus subcontractors.

At Dartmouth College in New Hampshire he learned to approach his managerial challenges by using the “human-centered design” approach. He discovered that by putting people first, 3ACE can excel. “Whatever product or service you provide, put the human in the center,” he says.

Community service in New Hampshire reinforced the concept. Working with a local nonprofit, Atim helped repair roofs for people with disabilities. That ensured that the homes’ residents would be

warm during the upcoming winter. He put the people first.

At the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Capo learned that “leaders take risks while staying close to the people.” That lesson reinforced his sense of what he calls “servant leadership,” with leaders serving the people who work for them instead of dominating them. Capo works for the large information technology company MTN and directs technology incubator [Akendewa](#) in Abidjan.

David Capo (State Dept.)



During his fellowship, Capo met with employees and managers of the Minneapolis company Clockwork Active Media. They emphasized that “what we do, who we work with and how we work with them is fundamental to our vision. We built the company on a set of values.”

“We love our clients. We love each other. And we love what we do,” they told him.

With their fellowships over, Atim and Capo intend to reach out to other YALI Network members through workshops and other gatherings, like meetups.

“We will help them develop their ideas and business plans, and help connect them with funders,” Capo says. “The first thing is education.”

Learn about human-centered design by taking the Mandela Washington Fellowship Institute online course [Design-Driven Entrepreneurship](#).

Find out more about how to meet other members of the YALI Network in your area by going to [YALI Network and Facebook Groups for Events](#).

[4 ways volunteering benefits ... you](#)

More than 1 billion people around the globe volunteer to help others. Whether working in a soup kitchen to feed the hungry or using your skills to help the needy, volunteers develop new skills while helping their communities.

Consider these great reasons to volunteer.


It develops your job and leadership skills

According to [Forbes](#), volunteer work is one of the best ways to hone the leadership skills needed for top executive positions in the business world. Volunteering for the board of a nonprofit organization, for instance, can offer a young professional executive experience she would not find in her early professional life.

In a nationwide survey, one in five volunteers in Australia said they had learned skills that would help their current or future employment prospects. 26 percent said volunteering had helped them acquire an accreditation or qualification.

It adds to your country's economic output

Unpaid economic work adds value to national economies. A survey in Bangladesh estimated the number of volunteers in that country as 16 million and their economic contribution at \$1.66 billion. In Britain, the Office for National Statistics says volunteers contribute \$37 billion to the British economy. That's 1.5 percent of British GDP.

Volunteers in Johannesburg, South Africa, deliver food and clothes to a local charity. (© AP )

It changes your government for the better

A recent United Nations [report](#) says citizen volunteers help make governments more responsive and accountable to their citizens. It cited crowdsourced mapping of post-election violence in Kenya and citizen volunteers monitoring air quality in China as examples where volunteerism resulted in policy change.

It makes you healthy

Not only is volunteering good for the world around you, it's good for your health — both mental and physical. Studies have shown that volunteering makes the volunteer feel more socially connected and helps ward off feelings of loneliness and depression. A study from Carnegie Mellon University suggests that adults who volunteer regularly are less likely to develop high blood pressure, a contributor to heart attacks, strokes and premature death.

[#YALICHAT on Volunteerism and Civic Leadership](#)

When you're willing to volunteer your time, smarts, and energy, how do you make sure your efforts have the maximum impact?

Jeff Franco is vice president and executive director of City Year Washington, DC, a nonprofit organization whose teams of young adults commit to a year of full-time service keeping students in school and on track to graduate. Since joining the organization in 2008, he has quadrupled the number of students and schools served and more than doubled the organization's fundraising capacity. He's also a YALI Network Online Course Instructor! Take his class ["Attracting and](#)

[Motivating Volunteers](#)” or [“Inspiring Community Participation.”](#)

Jeff held a #YALICHAT on [Facebook](#) about the benefits of volunteering and how to motivate those around you to get involved.

Read highlights below:



[When she sings about her rights, the president listens](#)

State Dept./D.A. Peterson



“Find the biggest platform you can,” said Grace Jerry when asked for her advice on bringing about change, “and add your voice.” Jerry, a Nigerian gospel singer, has a big voice. And when introducing President Obama at a gathering of 500 young African leaders, she took full advantage of it. The journey that brought Jerry to Washington began with personal tragedy 13 years ago, when she lost the use of her legs in an auto accident and learned how people with disabilities can be marginalized. She had sung in her church choir before the accident, but for a time afterward, she was depressed and lost interest in singing. As she recovered, she got serious about singing again and decided to use her voice to advocate for others with disabilities. “I want to shift the perception of people with disabilities from being viewed as those who need help to being viewed as [human beings with rights](#),” Jerry said.

Jerry introducing Obama. As Miss Wheelchair Nigeria, she expanded the fight for disability rights across Africa. (State Dept./D.A. Peterson)




Last year, she applied and was chosen for the [Young African Leaders Initiative’s](#) Mandela Washington Fellowship, which brings 500 people from sub-Saharan Africa to the U.S. to meet others working for change. “I connected with the fellow from Ethiopia who happened to be a polio survivor, and he’s very active in research and data on challenges facing people with disabilities in Ethiopia,”

Jerry said. "I met a guy from Sierra Leone with a disability who's a human rights lawyer." The three now work together to "create a more inclusive Africa." Jerry's singing attracts attention to any issue she trumpets. Her tribute to YALI called "E Go Happen" received 100,000 views in its first 24 hours online. Likely as not, it reached the ears of someone at the White House who chose her to introduce Obama when he spoke to the Mandela fellows.

When introducing the president, Jerry said that during her visit to America, thanks to the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) she had experienced "what inclusion and access should be. And I am going back to Africa to make sure that that dream becomes a reality." When the president came to the podium, he said, "Following Grace is a little bit like following Michelle," referring to his wife. "You're thinking, 'I'm not going to be *that* good.'"

What are the Benefits of Service to a Greater Cause?

It is service to a cause greater than oneself that inspires the greatest form of leadership.  Serving each other is in our genetic makeup. We are meant to take the time to give back to our communities, despite the common misperception that life is only about getting what is owed to you. Service doesn't have to be a choice between acting in one's own self-interest and acting in the best interests of others, because giving back can be as fulfilling and enriching for the volunteer as for the community that receives the extra help.

Some of the benefits that volunteerism provides are straightforward, such as resume and network building. Yet, many of the benefits of volunteering are immeasurable. When I volunteer, I feel joy and fulfillment. I grow in my own abilities and skill sets. I learn about the world around me and about the ways that I can help to work for justice in my community. I am enriched by each relationship that I create along the way, and I have fun meeting other like-minded people who may have grown up in a completely different community from my own.

Now more than ever, communities are realizing the impact of volunteer experience on developing well-rounded citizens. Many high schools and colleges in America require students to commit a certain number of community-service hours prior to graduation. Employers in America find candidates to be more attractive when they have volunteer activities on their resumes. Our AmeriCorps volunteers at City Year find more job opportunities and grow their professional networks after committing their hours of service with us. For our AmeriCorps volunteers, serving with City Year is often the catalyst that leads them into careers in teaching, public policy, other nonprofits, or law firms. There is no limit to how much our national service organization opens doors for our young idealists.


At City Year, we believe that the youth of our communities carry the idealism, the energy and the unique solutions to face the challenges that face our society. As an organization, City Year's vision is

that one day the most commonly asked question of a young person will be: “Where are you going to do your service year?” Think of how much it would change our societies if our young people were expected to complete one year of direct service to their communities as a rite of passage into the working world. The future of our communities rests on the shoulders of those who are willing to voluntarily make the world a better place. If we are not happy with our communities, then it is our obligation to do something positive to change them.

In my upcoming #YALICHAT, I welcome questions on the benefits of volunteerism in a community, on how to inspire community participation, and on motivating and attracting volunteers toward a cause.

Jeff Franco is vice president and executive director of City Year Washington, DC, a nonprofit organization whose teams of diverse young adults commit to a year of full-time service keeping students in school and on track to graduate. Since joining the organization in 2008, he has quadrupled the number of students and schools served, doubled the size of the staff and more than doubled the organization’s fundraising capacity. He has led the development and implementation of a strategic plan that will again grow City Year Washington, DC’s size and impact to reach at least half of the students who drop out of school in Washington.

[What Mandela taught me about leadership](#)

While spending time researching a book, Richard Stengel (left) learned a lot from Nelson  Mandela. (VOA)

For a couple of years in the early 1990s, Richard Stengel spent nearly every day with the late [Nelson Mandela](#), collaborating on Mandela’s biography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Now an undersecretary at the U.S. Department of State and author of a book titled *Mandela’s Way*, Stengel found himself recently in front of an audience of young Africans at the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit in Washington, D.C.

They had come to the U.S. to study leadership for several weeks at U.S. colleges and ended in Washington, where they met President Obama. It was here that Stengel shared lessons on leadership he had learned on the African continent from Mandela. Stengel had gleaned a lot from the man he — like many in South Africa — calls “Madiba.” The undersecretary said Madiba was a man who “wanted to disabuse people that he was a superhero, that he didn’t experience the same emotions as everybody else.” Here are three things he taught Stengel:


1. It's okay to be afraid

Stengel recalled a time when Mandela was flying to Natal in a small airplane. "Madiba was reading a newspaper," Stengel said. (Madiba loved newspapers, having been deprived of them for 27 years in prison.)

A bodyguard who had never flown told the pilot nervously that the propeller was not working. The pilot answered, "We know about this, and we've called ahead." The pilot said the airport crew would put foam on the runway and station firetrucks nearby. "Most of the time it's not a problem at all," he said.

Mandela listened and went back to reading. But after landing, Mandela said, "Man, I was terrified," and when Stengel registered surprise, Mandela said, "Richard, it would be irrational not to be afraid."

"Courage is not the absence of fear," Stengel said. "Courage is directing that fear."

"It was an amazing experience," Richard Stengel said about his time traveling with Nelson Mandela. (© AP Images) 

2. It's okay to be bitter

When speaking to Stengel, people often express amazement at Mandela's lack of bitterness after being released from prison.

But Mandela *was* wounded and bitter about what happened to him, Stengel said. The leader diverted those feelings by focusing on a noble goal: "to create this multiracial, free, democratic South Africa."


"He made incredible efforts. I think they were strategic too. ... He came out of prison to have meetings with his old guards, and he would go back and see the old apartheid leaders of South Africa. He would say, so many times, 'The past is the past. Forget about the past.'"

3. But be willing to step forward

Born in the remote part of Transkei, Mandela was the son of a village leader who was counsel to the tribal king. The father died of a heart attack when the son was just 12 years old, and afterward young Mandela was raised by the king alongside the king's own son.

Mandela "listened to stories of African leadership from the 15th and 16th centuries — brave African kings before the era of colonialism. He was steeped in African leadership," Stengel said.

That upbringing, Stengel said, informed what Mandela said about leading: "It's simple. It is the willingness to lead ... to step forward and say, 'I've got this. I'm going to do this.'"

Stengel told his audience, all members of the Young African Leaders Initiative, that Mandela  would be "so happy" to know they are preparing to meet the future challenges of the African continent. (State Dept./D.A. Peterson)
